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ABSTRACT

All of the presidential and vice presidential campaign stories in a simple random sample of 75 network television newscasts during the 1984 campaign were analyzed for possible political bias. The 4,363 sentences in these newscasts were classified as report sentences (factual and verifiable), inference sentences (subjective and not verifiable), and judgment sentences (expressions of favorable or unfavorable opinion). Results indicated that the networks were more politically biased than they were in the 1972, 1976, and 1980 campaigns, but not as overtly politically biased as many conservative political partisans have charged. NBC was significantly lower than ABC in its percentage of verifiable, factual sentences. NBC was significantly lower than ABC in its percentage of labeled inferences. NBC also had a significantly higher percentage of unfavorable judgments aimed at the Reagan/Bush ticket than did ABC. On most of the between network comparisons, NBC was generally more politically biased against the Reagan/Bush ticket than were the other two networks. (HOD)

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Measures of Network TV News Bias in Campaign '84

or

Should Jesse Helms "Become Dan Rather's Boss"?

by

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Abstract

All of the presidential and vice presidential campaign stories in a simple random sample of 75 network TV newscasts during campaign '84 were analyzed for possible political bias. The 4,363 sentences in these newscasts were classified as report sentences (factual and verifiable), inference sentences (subjective and not verifiable) and judgment sentences (expressions of favorable or unfavorable opinion). Results indicated that the networks were more politically biased than was apparently the case in 1972, 1976 and 1980, but not as overtly politically biased as many conservative political partisans have charged. While CBS is the network most often accused of political bias by conservatives, the most politically biased network in this study was not CBS, but NBC.

Measures of Network TV News Bias

in Campaign '84

The subject of TV News bias seems to be of perennial interest to both communication scholars and the general public. In fact, it was probably of even more interest in the 1984 presidential and vice presidential campaign than at any time since 1969, when former Vice President Agnew began his attacks upon the news media in general and network TV news in particular by referring to reporters as "nattering nabobs of negativism."

While the Nixon administration represented one of the lowest points in this century in terms of charges of news bias and in terms of strained administration/press relations, there have been a number of developments in the 1980s that have once again made news bias a highly relevant topic. Lichter and Rothman (1981) published the results of a survey of 240 "elite" print and broadcast journalists, some of whom were network anchormen, correspondents, producers, film editors and news executives. The results indicated that these journalists held overwhelmingly liberal views in terms of political preferences and in terms of moral issues such as abortion, homosexuality and adultery.

Earlier that same year Janet Cooke's fictionalized news story was exposed, and the Washington Post was forced to return the Pulitzer Prize she had won (Grossberger and Howard, 1981). Overnight the subject of news inaccuracy and bias became a national topic of conversation. A month later the New York Daily News faced a major embarrassment when one of its reporters was exposed as having faked a story from Northern Ireland (Grossberger, 1981). And in February of 1982 even the New York Times, America's "newspaper of record", admitted in a front-page story that one of its freelancers had fabricated a story about Cambodia

("N.Y. Times Freelancer," 1982)

Immediately following the Cooke affair, Newsweek commissioned a national poll by the Gallup Organization. The poll indicated that 52% of the respondents said you can believe "only some" of what you hear and read in the news media. And 33% of them said that reporters "often make things up" (Mayer, 1981).

A major 1984 event that once again made the subject of news bias a topic of national discussion was the highly publicized libel suit of General William Westmoreland vs. CBS-TV News (Press, Namuth, and McDaniel, 1984). Even before the suit was settled out of court, conservative North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms announced that he was launching a national campaign to urge conservatives to buy CBS stock so that they could take over the company and "become Dan Rather's boss" (Helms, 1985).

Scholarly attention to the subject of political news bias goes back over 30 years (Klein and Maccoby, 1954). The 1972 campaign was perhaps the most heavily studied in terms of network TV news bias. Based upon an analysis of 60 TV newscasts, Lowry concluded:

> In this particular study, the verbal data were not particularly clear on the question of bias for one candidate or the other---with the possible exception of the number of anti-Republican judgments the networks carried. On the other hand, the non-verbal data did show an overall pattern which can be interpreted as a pro-McGovern bias in general . . .(Lowry, 1974, p. 400).

Evarts and Stempel, based upon a content analysis of 75 network newscasts from the 1972 campaign, concluded: "For the networks, the so-called liberal bias that has been talked about so much simply was not evident. The widely-voiced assumption that CBS might be more favorable to the Democrats than were the other

networks was not the case" (Evarts and Stempel, 1974, p. 676).

In a massive study of news bias in the 1972 election Hofstetter concluded "No basis was present for asserting political bias in the network news coverage of the 1972 campaign" (Hofstetter, 1976, p. 204). "Most coverage was neutral or ambiguous, rather than favorable or unfavorable" (Hofstetter, 1976, p. 206).

Malaney and Buss (1979) analyzed CBS network TV coverage in campaign '72 and concluded that CBS coverage tended to be more neutral than favorable or unfavorable. Robinson and Sheehan conducted a major content analysis of CBS-TV and UPI coverage of campaign '80 and concluded about CBS: "If we add together all the bad press about the Republicans . . . in all campaign stories on CBS, the figure comes to 15 percent of the total news time. If we add together all the bad press for the Democrats, the figure is 19 percent" (Robinson and Sheehan, 1983, p. 99). While the above review of the literature is of course not exhaustive, one conclusion nevertheless seems clear: scholarly studies to date have for the most part not documented any major political bias on the part of the three television networks. The two most likely explanations for this are (a) the networks have not been politically biased in past elections and/or (b) the researchers have not adequately measured the bias that does exist. Regardless of what has been found in the news coverage of past elections, however, each new election presents new material for analysis.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to answer six questions pertaining to network TV coverage of campaign '84.

1. To what extent did the networks report objective, verifiable facts in campaign stories, as opposed to giving viewers subjective interpretations,

impressions and inferences? The importance of this question is that perhaps what political partisans perceive as being politically biased reporting is simply subjective reporting, but not necessarily politically biased subjective reporting.

2. When the networks did report subjective interpretations and impressions, to what extent did they openly acknowledge the subjectivity of their statements? All of us---journalists and scholars alike---are to some extent subjective and often rely on inferences rather than on strictly verifiable facts. It is impossible to function in life without making inferences. However, when we do make inferences it somehow seems more objective or honest to acknowledge to our readers or listeners that in fact we are making inferences. Scholars are generally careful about doing this, but to what extent did the networks do it?

3. In terms of statements that were indeed judgmental (as opposed to being merely subjective), to what extent did the networks show an overall pattern of anti-conservative bias as is generally charged by political conservatives? That is, did the networks present more negative judgment statements about the conservative Reagan/Bush ticket than about the liberal Mondale/Ferarro ticket?

4. When judgmental statements (pro and con) were carried by the networks, who did the judging? Did the network anchormen and correspondents do it, or did the networks simply transmit what various partisan news sources were saying? This question gets to the heart of the distinction between news versus editorial comment. If the anchormen and correspondents made the judgments themselves, then by definition they were editorializing. If they simply reported the judgments made by news sources, this would of course simply be considered part of the news function.

5. To what extent did the networks let the candidates, their staff members

and supporters speak directly (i.e., on-air) to the American public, as opposed to summarizing what they said? In particular, did liberals get to speak directly to the public more than conservatives did? Was there bias in terms of direct access to the public?

6. On any or all of the above variables, to what extent did CBS show more anti-conservative/pro-liberal bias than the other two networks? Since CBS has been singled out for special criticism by Senator Jesse Helms and other conservatives, do the data indicate that there is some justification for conservatives to try to "become Dan Rather's boss"?

Method

The universe for this study was the 51 weekdays (Monday through Friday) from August 27 through November 5, 1984. The Republican convention ended August 23, and election day was November 6. From this universe a simple random sample of 25 days was selected, and on each sample day the network TV evening newscasts of ABC, CBS and NBC were recorded on audio cassettes. This resulted in a total sample of 75 newscasts.

All news stories pertaining to the presidential and vice-presidential campaigns were transcribed sentence by sentence. The occasional commentaries by George Will, John Chancellor and others were not analyzed, and other news stories about the Reagan administration (i.e., the regular affairs of government) were likewise not analyzed. Due to the ways the networks "packaged" their stories, there was little difficulty differentiating campaign stories from commentaries and non-campaign stories.

The unit of analysis was the sentence, and the context unit was the news story. Unlike an otherwise similar study (Lowry, 1974), which analyzed only

sentences spoken by the anchormen and correspondents, this study analyzed all sentences, regardless of who spoke them.

Content Categories

In all content analysis studies, almost everything rises or falls upon the categories; a study can be no better than its categories. The present category system is based upon Hayakawa's (1978) trichotomy of sentence types---reports, inferences and judgments---that have been elaborated upon and applied in two prior network TV content analysis studies by Lowry (1971, 1974). According to Hayakawa, the report is the basic symbolic act that enables people to exchange information on what they have seen, heard and felt. "Reports adhere to the following rules: first, they are capable of verification; second, they exclude, as far as possible, inferences and judgments" (Hayakawa, 1978, p. 33). The expanded Hayakawa-Lowry system used in this study was as follows:

1. Report sentence/attributed
2. Report sentence/unattributed
3. Inference sentence/labeled
4. Inference sentence/unlabeled
5. Judgment sentence/attributed/favorable
6. Judgment sentence/attributed/unfavorable
7. Judgment sentence/unattributed/favorable
8. Judgment sentence/unattributed/unfavorable
9. All other sentences

A report sentence is one which states verifiable facts---facts which are out in the open and observable, not things which are matters of personal opinion or inside somebody's head. The sentence is of such a form that it is capable of being

verified if one has the time, money and inclination to do so. Attribution indicates whether the reporter is stating the information on his own authority or whether he is indicating he received the information from someone else.[1]

Inference sentences are not capable of verification, at least not at the time they are made. As Hayakawa defines them, they are "statements about the unknown made on the basis of the known" (Hayakawa, 1978, p. 35). Some of the characteristics of inferences are: they rely on personal or subjective opinions, conclusions, beliefs and feelings; they attempt to say what other people think or feel, as opposed to a report of what other people say they think or feel; they attempt to explain someone's reasons or motives for doing something.[2]

Labeled inferences are a particular type of inference in which the reporter more or less admits that the information he is providing is not necessarily completely verifiable. For example, when a reporter says "It appears . . .", he is saying parenthetically, "It appears (to me) . . ." The assumption here is that a reporter is less likely to be criticized if he openly admits that he is giving subjective information than if he simply gives the same information without openly admitting it. The following words were considered tip-off words indicating that the reporters were making labeled inferences: appear, appears, appeared, apparently, appearing, apparent; could; look, looks, looked, looking; may, maybe; might; perhaps; possible; probable, probably; seem, seems, seemed, seemingly; sound, sounds, sounded, sounding; think (in the sense of "I---the reporter---think . . .").[3]

Judgment sentences, as Hayakawa defines them, are "expressions of the writer's approval or disapproval of the occurrences, persons, or objects he is describing" (Hayakawa, 1978, p. 37). In addition to approval/disapproval, the

related notions of like/dislike, good/bad and so on were classified as judgment sentences. The attribution variable indicates whether the reporter was making the judgment himself or whether he has simply reporting to his viewers a judgment someone else made. Judgments can obviously be either favorable or unfavorable in direction. Sentence categories 5 through 8 were further subdivided as to whether the judgments were aimed at Reagan, Mondale , Bush or Ferarro. This subdividing resulted in a total of 21 different sentence types rather than nine in the simplified listing above.[4]

The final category---"all other sentences"---was used for on-air questions asked by reporters or others and for the few sentences that were too garbled due to crowd noises or other audio reasons to be coded.

Many sentences were "mixed sentences" in that they contained, for example, a report/attributed and an inference/labeled, or an inference/unlabeled and a judgment of some kind. The rule for handling such mixed sentences is that they were always placed in the highest-numbered appropriate category. Another frequently-employed coding rule was: "A report of an inference someone else is making is still a report sentence/attributed, and should be placed in category 1."[5]

Each sentence was also placed in one of the following 19 categories to indicate who was doing the on-air speaking:

1. Anchorman
2. Correspondent
3. Reagan
4. Mondale
5. Bush
6. Ferarro
11. Other Reagan supporters
12. Other Mondale supporters
13. Other Bush supporters
14. Other Ferarro supporters
15. Other Reagan opponents
16. Other Mondale opponents

7. Reagan staff members
8. Mondale staff members
9. Bush staff members
10. Ferarro staff members
17. Other Bush opponents
18. Other Ferarro opponents
19. All other speakers

Reliability Checking

The author served as the primary coder. To obtain an estimate of coding reliability, a simple random sample of 20 of the 75 newscasts was completely recoded after an interval of two to three weeks. Intra-coder reliability was .93. Two advanced undergraduate students in a mass media research course served as check coders. Inter-coder reliability was .86.

Results

The 75 newscasts produced a total of 4,363 sentences in political campaign stories. ABC had the most sentences (1,693), NBC was second with 1,435 and CBS had the fewest with 1,235.

Table 1 presents the data needed to answer several of the six research questions. All of the tests of significance in this table were between the highest and lowest percentage in each row. Research question 1 asked to what extent the networks presented their viewers with objective, verifiable facts. ABC was significantly more factual than NBC in terms of the combined total percentage of report sentences ($p < .01$) and specifically in terms of the percentage of report sentences/attributed ($p < .001$).

Research question 2 asked to what extent the networks openly acknowledged the subjectivity of their inferences, if and when they did make inferences. To begin with, ABC had significantly more inference sentences/labeled ($p < .01$) and

inference sentences/unlabeled ($p < .01$) than did NBC. However, research question 2 is not asking about totals, it is asking, in effect, about the proportion of openly acknowledged inferences to other inferences that were made without open acknowledgment. Of the 658 inference sentences on ABC, 6.4% were labeled inferences. This compares with 3.1% of NBC's 479 inferences. Thus it can be said that NBC was significantly ($p < .05$) less open or less journalistically cautious than ABC was about the inferences it made.

Research question 3 asked whether, in total, the networks presented more negative judgment statements about the conservative Reagan/Bush ticket than about the liberal Mondale/Ferarro ticket. The answer is decidedly yes. Table 2 shows that, collectively, the three networks presented 199 unfavorable judgment sentences about the Mondale/Ferarro ticket and 447---well over twice as many---about the Reagan/Bush ticket. As indicated by the totals in Table 2, this anti-conservative tilt was statistically significant ($X^2 = 8.06$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$).

Research question 4 asked: who did the judging? Was it the anchormen and correspondents or was it various news sources? Out of the total of 178 favorable judgment sentences carried by all three networks, 103 favored Reagan/Bush and 75 favored Mondale/Ferarro. Of the 178, an even 80% were either made by various news sources quoted on-air or were attributed to them by the anchormen and correspondents. The remaining 20% of the favorable judgments were made by the anchormen and correspondents themselves---i.e., in an editorial fashion.

There were 646 negative judgments carried by the three networks about the four candidates. Of this total, 93% were either made by news sources in on-air statements or were attributed to them by the anchormen and correspondents. This leaves 7% of the negative judgments which were made by the anchormen and

correspondents themselves---departing from the news function and entering the editorial function. To summarize this point, the networks overall were more likely to present negative judgments about the candidates than positive judgments. However, as a percentage of each type of judgment, the anchormen and correspondents themselves were more likely to express favorable judgments than unfavorable judgments.

Research question 3 asked whether the liberal candidates and their supporters got to speak directly (i.e., on-air) to the American public more than the conservative candidates and their supporters did. Mondale, Ferarro, their staffs and supporters had 620 on-air sentences, while Reagan, Bush, their staffs and supporters had 586 on-air sentences. Thus it can be said that the liberal candidates had 5.8% more on-air sentences than the conservative candidates.

The last research question asked: to what extent did CBS show more anti-conservative/pro-liberal bias than the other two networks? In terms of the data presented above, and in terms of the net judgment scores presented in Table 2 there is no reason for conservatives to single out CBS for special criticism. On the contrary, if conservatives feel they should try to take over one of the networks they should go for NBC, not CBS. NBC's treatment of the Reagan/Bush ticket was significantly more negative than its treatment of the Mondale/Ferarro ticket (X^2=8.72, df=1, p<.01). ABC also showed a significant anti-Reagan/Bush tilt, but not quite to the same degree (X^2=6.06, df=1, p<.05). CBS, generally the most criticized network, was the only one which did not show a statistically significant tilt toward either ticket. While it did carry 143 unfavorable judgments about the Reagan/Bush ticket, it also carried 46 favorable judgments about the same ticket.

Discussion and Conclusions

Perhaps the overall conclusion of this study is that it found a greater amount of political bias than most researchers found in the '72, '76 and '80 elections. Does this mean that the networks have become more politically biased? Or have the research methods used to measure bias become more refined and effective? Unfortunately, this question cannot be answered within the scope of this 1984 study alone. What can be concluded, though, is that the three networks did not treat the Reagan/Bush ticket the same way they treated the Mondale/Ferarro ticket.

Certainly one would expect judgment sentences to be present in the reporting of any election. The networks would not be doing their jobs if they neglected to report the judgments the candidates, their staffs and supporters were making. However, even during an election one would not expect the anchormen and correspondents to be making either favorable or unfavorable judgments on their own. And since "fairness" and "balance" are part of the journalistic codes of ethics in this country, one would expect roughly equivalent net judgment scores for the two tickets -- which was decidedly not the case in this study. This expectation seems reasonable, at least, in a campaign that is long and where both sides are making numerous favorable judgments about themselves and unfavorable judgments about their opponents every day. It is true that news reporting is a selective process, but the networks did not select in a balanced way.

Perhaps the networks might answer by saying: "We simply report what we see and hear. We report what's out there. We reflect what is going on in society. If you don't like the way the news comes out, don't blame us." The irony of this defense is that in terms of the net judgment totals in Table 2, the networks presented significantly more negative judgments about Reagan/Bush than about

Mondale/Ferarro, but the American public gave Reagan/Bush an unprecedented electoral victory. How can these two different outcomes be explained? Perhaps there was a conscious or subconscious effort on the part of the networks to reduce Reagan's lead in the polls to make it a closer, more exciting race to cover. Perhaps there is simply more to criticize about incumbents than about challengers. Or perhaps, as Lichter and Rothman (1981) have suggested, the network "elite" were grossly out of touch with the values of the American public and, intentionally or not, the liberal "elite" were letting their biases show.

How many editorial judgments are appropriate on the part of the anchormen and correspondents in news stories? The networks might say "Give us a break. We made only a total of 80 unattributed judgments out of 4,363 sentences." On the other hand, the codes of news ethics do not permit 1.8% of the sentences in news stories to be judgments on the part of the reporter. They say that editorial judgments should be restricted to clearly identified editorials or commentaries.

Bias can take many different forms---certainly many forms other than those measured in this study. Nevertheless, as far as this study could determine, it appears that Senator Jesse Helms is going after the wrong man. If he feels it necessary to attempt a network takeover, he should try to become Tom Brokaw's boss, not Dan Rather's boss.

NBC was significantly lower than ABC in its percentage of verifiable, factual sentences. NBC was significantly lower than ABC in its percentage of labeled inferences---the type of inference sentence where one openly and honestly acknowledges to readers or listeners that the information being presented is not necessarily factual or verifiable. NBC had a significantly higher percentage of unfavorable judgments aimed at the Reagan/Bush ticket than did ABC. And NBC

was clearly out of line with the other two networks in terms of net unfavorable judgment scores. On most of the variables analyzed in this study, and on most of the between network comparisons NBC was generally more politically biased against the Reagan/Bush ticket than were the other two networks.

Based upon the overall pattern of scores on all of the variables analyzed in this study---and especially those in Table 2---it can be concluded that all three networks showed some evidence of anti-conservative/pro-liberal bias, but NBC was especially vulnerable to criticism. The three networks may not have been as politically biased as many conservative political partisans have charged but, on the other hand, the networks are certainly not as balanced or objective as they would have the public believe. As is often the case, the truth seems to lie between the two extremes.

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Footnotes

[1]Examples of report sentences/attributed: He said at the Democratic convention that taxes would have to go up in order to get the deficit down. [Either Mondale said this at the Democratic convention or he didn't.] The President said, "I have no problem with that," and he didn't elaborate. [Either Reagan made this statement and nothing else on the subject or he didn't.] Examples of report sentences/unattributed: Mr. Reagan was in Ohio on a whistle-stop train tour. [Either he was or he wasn't.] President Reagan was back out on the road, with stops in Ohio and Wisconsin [Either he was or he wasn't.]

[2]Examples of inference sentences/unlabeled: For three months now, they've responded to her with extraordinary enthusiasn, coming by the tens of tousands to see and to feel and touch her. [It is impossible to verify how much enthusiasm is "extraordinary enthusiasm."] While the lion's share of attention goes to the presidential candidates, at least most of the time, the vice-presidential candidates have certainly been campaigning just as hard. [It is impossible to verify "lion's share of attention" or "just as hard."]

[3]Examples of inference sentences/labeled. But, in a Cincinnati television interview, Mr. Bush seemed to disagree with Schultz. [By using the word "seemed", the reporter is acknowledging to his listeners that it is not a verifiable fact that Bush disagreed with Schultz. It is a matter of the reporter's interpretation, and he is admitting this.] All this talk about possible consequences may have something to do with that. [The reporter is admitting doubt in his statement by using the word "may."]

[4]Examples of judgment sentences/attributed: I almost resent, Vice President Bush, your patronizing attitude, that you have to teach me about foreign policy.

[Ferarro was speaking on-air.] If my opponent's campaign were a television show, it would be Let's Make a Deal. [Reagan was speaking on-air.] If delivered as prepared, it is a rip-snorter of a speech, in which Mondale accuses President Reagan of creating a holier-than-thou climate by gift wrapping political issues in the name of God. [Statement made by Ted Copple, but attributed to Mondale's prepared speech.]

Examples of judgment sentences/unattributed: His campaign was potmarked with rhetorical excesses and silly mistakes. [NBC's John Severson evaluating Bush's campaign, November 1, 1984.] The problem was that Mondale's case often was poorly packaged and confusing. [NBC's Lisa Myers making a clear judgment about Mondale's campaign, November 5, 1984.]

[5]A copy of the complete coding manual is available from the author upon request.

Table 1

Types of Sentences Reported by Three Networks in Campaign '84 Stories

Type of sentences	Networks ABC (N-1,693)	CBS (N-1,235)	NBC (N-1,435)
1. Report sentence/attributed	29.5%	29.4%	29.3%
2. Report sentence/unattributed	13.9***	11.0	8.8
3. Inference sentence/labeled	2.5**	1.2	1.0
4. Inference sentence/unlabeled	36.4**	34.2	32.3
5. Judgment/attributed/favorable to Reagan/Bush	.8	2.9***	2.2
6. Judgment/attributed/favorable to Mondale/Ferarro	1.2	.9	2.1*
7. Judgment/attributed/unfavorable to Reagan/Bush	6.4	10.9	11.8***
8. Judgment/attributed/unfavorable to Mondale/Ferarro	3.8	4.1	5.2
9. Judgment/unattributed/favorable to Reagan/Bush	.1	.8**	.6
10. Judgment/unattributed/favorable to Mondale/Ferarro	2	.3	.5
11. Judgment/unattributed/unfavorable to Reagan/Bush	.3	.7	1.5***
12. Judgment/unattributed/unfavorable to Mondale/Ferarro	.2	---	.3
13. All other sentences	4.7	3.6	4.2
TOTAL*	100.0%	100.0%	99.8%[a]

*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

[a]Note: does not total 100% due to normal rounding error.

Table 2

Summary of Favorable, Unfavorable and Net Judgment Scores

Networks	Targets of the Judgments					
	Reagan/Bush			Mondale/Ferarro		
	Fav.	Unfav.	Net	Fav.	Unfav.	Net
ABC	+16	-113	(-97)*	+23	-68	(-45)
CBS	+46	-143	(-97)	+15	-51	(-36)
NBC	+41	-191	(-150)**	+37	-80	(-43)
TOTAL	+103	-447	(-344)**	+75	-199	(-124)

*p<.05 **p<.01